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Wired

By
KEITH
GAVE

ROSE CITY – Glenn Wilson is on a roll now. He takes a long pull from a can of Mountain Dew on the conference room table, then pirouettes to the door leading outside and stands there taking another drag on a Marlboro menthol.

"I've got three addictions," he confesses.

We'll get to the third one a bit later.

For now, Wilson continues his discourse on his amazing Internet company, M-33 Access, how he's dedicated to bringing Northeast Michigan into the new century and why it's so important.

"When I get it so that every kid has high-speed Internet in my area, I'll feel good," he said. "I want digital learning for every kid, period. End of story. When a kid in Moscow has a better service than the kids in Rose City, well, that's just wrong. In order for our kids to compete tomorrow, we need the technology now."

And so long as those living in less-populated areas – like most of the state's Northeast – must depend on their local phone companies or cable companies for such important services as broadband wireless, well, don't get him started.

For a guy whose motor is always running, with or without the nicotine and the caffeine jolts, Wilson shifts his soap box into overdrive at a mere mention of phone companies. He is outraged by the rates companies charge for last century's technologies.

"The phone system up here is antiquated," he said. "Do they have the technology to fix it? Absolutely. Will they?"

Wilson laughs sardonically.

"I want to bury those guys," he adds. "They make life miserable. The small towns have just as important needs as the big cities that they (phone companies) care so much about. There's just not the same demand in numbers up here, so they don't care."

If you haven't figured it out by now, Wilson cares.

"We need two things desperately here: infrastructure and the population to drive it with a good labor force," he said. "My part is to make sure we have the technological infrastructure."

He's well on his way. Within a few years of starting his own company out of sheer frustration, Wilson, 41, lays claim to the largest contiguous wireless Internet grid on Earth.

Not bad for a guy who should be early into his retirement from the military.

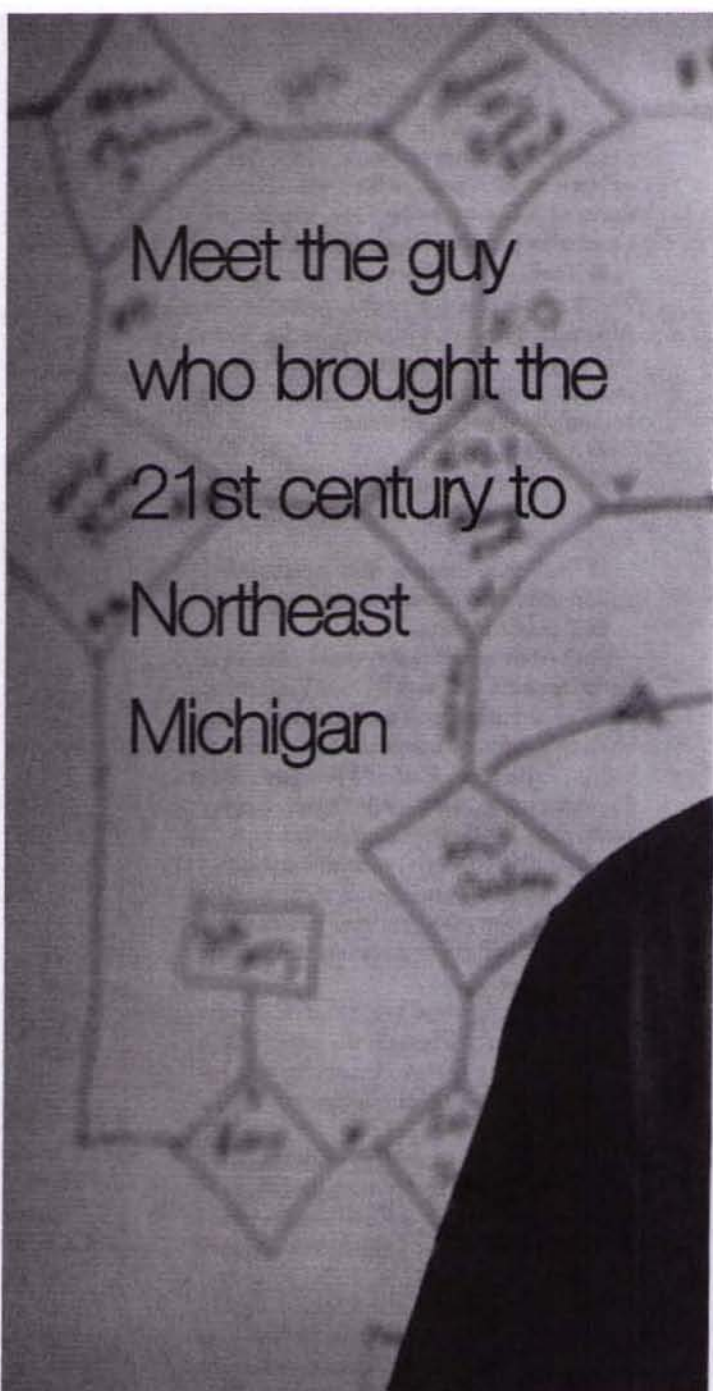
But Wilson's Army career was short-lived after he wound up being nearly flattened by an armored personnel carrier that took a wrong turn through the woods while on maneuvers at Fort Carson, Colo. – and his life changed forever.

"I had my whole career planned," he said, "and then I got run over by an APC."

Fresh out of the Army, Wilson enrolled in an engineering program at Ferris State, studying computer-aided design. Before he graduated, he went to work as a draftsman for a Grand Rapids firm, but it was a basic computer programming course he took in college that put him far ahead of the learning curve.

"It was a joke course, but I learned I had a natural gift for it," he said. "Pretty soon, I was designing programs."

After a stint designing oven fixtures for the company that makes stoves for Subway, Wilson took a job with Symbol Technologies in the heart of Silicon Valley – Costa Mesa, Calif.



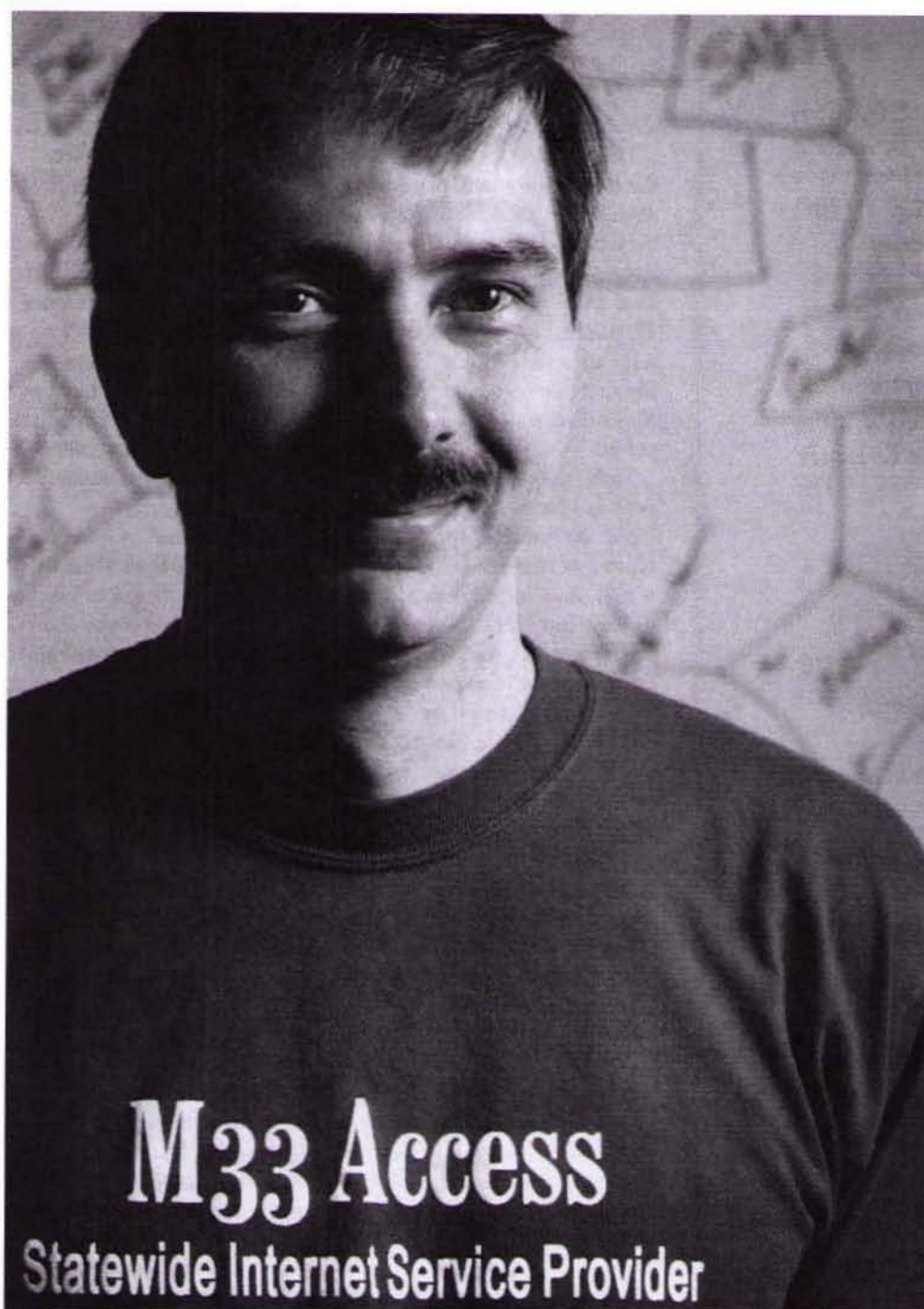
Meet the guy
who brought the
21st century to
Northeast
Michigan

"I was working with some of the most brilliant guys in the world," Wilson recalled. "I got in way over my head, but I brought my Michigan work ethic with me to California."

The son of a Michigan farmer who was disabled by injuries in the Korean War, Wilson managed not only to survive, but thrive.

When his company became the target of a corporate buyout, Wilson had two options: Move to New York or take a buyout. He took the buyout, planning a career as a hired gun in the software design business.

On a visit home to Michigan, he met his wife, Tracie. As a corporate consultant, Wilson



M33 Access

Statewide Internet Service Provider

PHOTOGRAPHY BY SILAS CHENG

M-33 Access founder
Glenn Wilson looks
over the shoulder of
his network adminis-
trator Russ Hall.



could work anywhere. All he needed was a computer and an Internet connection.

"We basically narrowed our choices to Kentucky and Colorado," Wilson said, "so we threw a dart, and it took us to Colorado."

Pagosa Springs, Colo., a town so small that the World Wide Web was but a rumor.

"I picked a town that didn't have Internet," said Wilson. So while developing software he started his own Internet companies, Pagosa Worldwide and Durango Worldwide.

Wilson sold the companies, enabling him to move his family of six children back to Michigan, where he could once again hang a consulting shingle and get back to his first love.

"I'm a programmer at heart," he said. "I just wanted to develop some software."

He and Tracie picked out a pleasant little farm/ranch in Rose City, just off M-33, the road that would take them to her hometown of Mio, about 15 miles away. The place was big enough for her horses to roam. The kids had good schools to attend.

Life was going to be just perfect, or so Wilson thought—until he tried to get an Internet hookup.

"I was told I could sign up for one at the local library," he said. "When I called, the lady said she'd mail me an application. I told her to send a fax instead, that it's a lot faster that way. She said, 'Oh, there there's no hurry. There are 32 people ahead of you.'"

"Then she described the Internet connection from hell," Wilson recalled. "How it was busy from the time the kids got home from school until the wee hours of the morning."

"I told her, 'Good news. I don't need your help. I'll build the biggest (expletive) network you've ever seen. And she said, 'Oh would you, please? We could really use a good network.' She egged me right on."

So he did. Using mostly leftover equipment from boxes he brought with him from Colorado, Wilson began building his network. He ran a dedicated Internet line to his home and built a tower to broadcast the high-speed signal to nearby residents. He bought a few new modems and soon as he was up and running, no longer having

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to dial long-distance to his old company in Colorado to get reliable Internet service.

His initial conversations with the local library took place a few days before Christmas, followed by some serious and sometimes tempestuous discussions with the local phone companies. By Feb. 19, about two months later, he was up and running his own Internet company. On March 1, M-33 Access was open to the public.

Since then, the company has provided Internet service in some form to nearly anybody in Northeast Michigan who wants it - and that includes broadband wireless and DSL.

And just like that, Wilson had introduced the most cost-efficient means of bringing service to a rural area. In the process, he opened the floodgates for the kind of economic growth the region has struggled for decades to achieve.

This spring, Wilson plans to have a system in place that will make Mio and Rose City the envy of much of the rest of the state by equipping them with roaming wireless technology available through a 3 1/2-mile radius of the downtown in each community, giving residents and visitors access to the most state-of-the-art system available anywhere in the world.

The system, which he hopes to expand throughout the Northeast, should give the region a leg up in attracting business and industry as well as tourism.

As his company began to grow, Wilson needed more buildings to accommodate a larger staff. (Already, a chicken coop had been spruced up for use as an office, and much of the space in Tracie's horse barn was being used for essential equipment.) But things came to a head when a county bureaucrat threatened to deny a permit to build, since Wilson's property was zoned residential.

"The county told us we weren't allowed to have all these employees out here," said Wilson, who has nearly three dozen workers

on his payroll. "Now remember, they're telling this to the guy who's providing them with their high-speed Internet service."

"I said, 'Either change the law or I shut it down.'"

No laws were changed, but the county quickly reclassified M-33 Access as an essential service to the county, putting M-33 on par with police, fire and emergency medical care. He can build pyramids out there now, if he wanted.

M-33 Access means every bit as much to many local businesses, as well.

When Brad Green's Ace Hardware stores in West Branch and Rose City began to lose business after big box stores like Wal-Mart and Home Depot moved in, he looked for ways to expand and save his business. He wanted to open a hardware store in Standish, but was told by his service providers that it would cost him about \$25,000 per location to upgrade his computer systems with high-speed Internet service and tie them all together.

He turned to Wilson for help.

"I'd heard through the grapevine there was this crazy guy in Rose City, so I gave him a call," Green said. "Glenn put up a tower in the right locations and bounced radio signals - however that works. The people that provide our point of sales systems had never worked on a wireless system before. At first, they refused. Then they kicked and screamed a little. But when we powered everything on, every single piece of equipment in all three stores worked perfectly."

The cost to Green for all three locations: About \$300, an enormous savings that enabled him not only to stay in business, but grow it. "We'd be dead in the water otherwise," he added. Since then, he's become an ardent supporter of everything Wilson is doing.

"He talks big, and he's always thinking big," Green said. "But Glenn won't commit to something unless he knows he can do it. And he's always been there for us."

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Pins mark locations around mid- and Northern Michigan where M-33 Access provides Internet service.

When Kirtland Community College in Roscommon was looking to upgrade its network and maybe save a few bucks in the process, it turned to Wilson, too. Tim Scherer, the college's director of institutional services, recalls the first time he met Wilson.

"He's overwhelming at the beginning," Scherer said. "And the hardest part is always getting to believe he can deliver what he says he'll deliver. But he's continuously delivered on everything we've ever talked about. That's been most impressive."

The college not only got twice its former capacity, but spends upward of \$200,000 less per year with M-33 Access.

"He definitely has the interests of the local schools and community as close to his top priority as he can and still be in business," Scherer said. "And people have a hard time believing that. It's real hard not to say, 'Oh yeah, right. This is too good to be true.'"

Scherer was so impressed with Wilson's honor, commitment and ethical manner that he asked him to serve as best man at his wedding last summer. One of the few times Wilson has ever been at a loss for words was delivering the toast. For all his bluster, he's not a public speaker.

Nor is he the world's greatest businessman. And his accountants are beginning to convince him of that.

"I didn't build this thing on a model to make money," he said. "At some point, we have to figure

out how to do that."

And though he has put most of his life's savings into this company, he disputes the \$10 million figure that has been published in some reports. "Maybe half that," he confesses.

All he knows is that it's not uncommon for people to stop alongside the road when they see his trucks and inquire on how they can get M-33 Access at their house.

"This country was built on supply and demand," he said. "The demand is there. Somebody's got to do it. All I'm concerned about is being able to satisfy the demand without ripping people off."

Meantime, Wilson does allow himself one indulgence he shares with his wife: hot cars, notably Mustangs. Their collection includes a '65 blue coupe, her wedding present to him; a '72 blue coupe, his wedding present to her; a '70 Mach I with a 428 Cobra Jet; a '69 red coupe; a '71 Grande, red with black racing stripes; an '03 red Mach I; a '96 green GT; and one more he recently ordered, a new Mustang Cobra with a 458-horsepower engine.

That third addiction, if you haven't figured it out by now? Speed – be it on the roads or on the World Wide Web.

Glenn Wilson lives his life with his foot to the floorboard. And all of Northeast Michigan is riding shotgun with him, heading full-bore into a new century. **A**

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